

# In the Covid-19 times, states must do more to safeguard disadvantaged children's right to education

Even as the RTE Act has ensured 25% reservation for economically backward students, the lack of internet access has resulted in dropouts.

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A child attends an online class using a device loaned to her by her school principal. | Noah Seelam / AFP

Over the past one-and-a-half year, the prolonged closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic has [reversed](#) the educational gains made in the last decade. This is especially relevant to socially and educationally disadvantaged children who gained access to education in private schools through the quota for them under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.

Section 12(1) of the Act directs private schools to reserve 25% seats for children from economically weaker sections. Children in this quota are admitted at the entry level and the cost of the next eight years of their education is borne by the government.

## School closure impact

The impact of closures of schools has a direct relation with the economic status of the children – the difference between the haves and have nots. The situation is similar to the collapse of the medical infrastructure that we saw with the onset of the second wave of Covid-19, where those who could pay through private healthcare were saved and the government had left the public system to the poor through its negligence.

This is evident from the [government data](#) that shows only 54.2% of schools have electricity connections and 3.9% of schools have functional computers.

Consequently, there have been high dropouts especially for children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds due to the fact that the parents of these children lose their employment that forces the children to contribute towards the sustenance of the family. One such example is the family of [Dashrath and Urmila](#) whose two daughters study in the schools covered under the 25% reservation quota under the Right to Education Act.

Dashrath and his son, being daily wagers have lost their jobs amidst the pandemic and only possess one mobile phone that has no internet facility, thus at a time when bare survival has become impossible, the question of buying a smartphone gets thrown out of the window. As a result, their daughters have not been able to attend online classes in the last one and a half years.



Representational image. Photo credit: Prashant Waydande/Reuters

## Digital divide

Seen in this light, the switch to online classes was without taking cognisance of the disruption to the socially and economically disadvantaged students' lives and the realities they face on a day to day basis and assuming that all have digital devices and uninterrupted connectivity.

This impact can be understood from the fact that the imposition of e-learning modes of education without providing supporting infrastructure has affected the [various factors](#) that are related to class

pedagogy such as student's participation, access to study material, class attendance, assessment of students along with many other related issues.

Coming to the recently adopted National Education Policy, 2020 that was passed amidst the pandemic seems to have ignored the troubles of students from these communities as it only mentions the pandemic once under the section on digital section.

In practice, the National Education Policy 2020 has ignored the relevance of the factors such as caste, religion, region or ethnicity for the children from the weaker sections who are suffering and being denied education due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed throughout the country. These students who are included within the 2020 policy as well as the Right to Education Act, 2009 have become hard to reach due to the ongoing pandemic.

In this respect, a [writ petition](#) was filed by Child Rights Trust, a Bangalore-based NGO working extensively in the area of Child Rights, and Neena Nayak, a child rights advocate and activist, before the Supreme Court of India under Article 32 of the Constitution seeking enforcement of fundamental rights. Through this petition, the aim was to ensure that migrant children are provided with proper living conditions, nutrition, health care/immunisation, access to education and their protection.

Thus, in order to fulfil the commitment under the Right To Education Act, 2009, and National Education Policy, 2020, the states need to reconceptualise the mode of delivery of education by involving subsidised internet access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus should also be on addressing the well-being and welfare of children by removal of livelihood insecurity and ensuring security against economic and social oppression by addressing their day to day needs like health and education.

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